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ABSTRACT

This paper examines major issues in teacher certification, such as appropriate certification patterns for teachers of students with disabilities, the use of categorical or noncategorical certification, and relevance of certification groupings by grade level for special educators. Secondly, issues of alternative certification are discussed, including the role of alternative certification patterns in the preparation of special education personnel; decision making regarding the standards and requirements for alternative certification; and the role of institutions of higher education. Other issues addressed include reciprocity among states, the establishment of teacher preparation standards and monitoring programs, and placement of the authority for recommending certification. Also noted are such consumer/employer issues as school district problems in finding certificated teachers in all needed areas. (DB)

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# Issues in Certification Needs

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In the mid-seventies noted evangelist, Dr. Billy Graham, said: "The political process is the way we change things for the better." His remarks during a Democratic Party fund raising telethon, were preceded by Senator John Glenn's statement that "Every American is a politician whether you like it or not" (Jones, 1976).

The wave of politically-inspired education reform movements have focused on teacher and student competency as well curricular issues in the public schools. Teacher certificates, licenses, and endorsements become a focus--rightly or wrongly--when teacher competency is the concern. Teacher certification, as a state function, is usually assigned as a responsibility of the state education agency (SEA). Since education consumes significant state and local resources in every state, education falls into the realm of politics. While Dr. Graham's comment suggested change is "for the better," not all educators (or politicians) would agree that it is always the case.

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Political decisions in Virginia have resulted in the requirement that initial teacher certification at the bachelor's degree level be offered only for majors in the arts and sciences. Within the arts and sciences degree, the prospective teacher is limited to 18 hours of professional education courses. The bachelor's degree in education essentially no longer exists, at least for those individuals who wish to teach in the public schools. The requirement, effective in July 1992, may or may not result in better teachers. Many Virginia educators have their doubts that students will receive a better education as politicians and policy makers envisioned when changing the degree standard. The Virginia situation is only one example of an issue in certification.

What then are the major issues in teacher certification today?

## Defining the Issue

There is extensive documentation in the professional literature that highlights the critical shortage of qualified personnel to work with individuals with disabilities (e.g., NASDE, 1990; Smith-Davis, 1990; USDE, 1991). Although school districts are mandated to provide appropriate educational services, they are increasingly faced with an inability to employ qualified (and certified) staff to deliver the necessary services. Personnel shortages have "rekindled" the long standing controversy about certification in special education. The controversial issues include, but are not limited to, four major areas of concern.

1. Significance of Certification
   a. What are the most appropriate certification patterns for teachers who want to work with students with disabilities?
   b. Should there be categorical or non-categorical certification? If both have a place in the scheme of certification, for what purpose should each one be designed?
   c. Should certification be K-12, or should it be in line with elementary/secondary certification, which have grade-level groupings, such as K-8, 9-12?
2. Alternative Certification
   a. What place do "alternative" certification patterns have in the preparation of personnel to work with students with disabilities?
   b. Who should be involved in the decision-making as to the standards and requirements for "alternative" certification?
   c. What role will the institutions of higher education play in the formal course work requirements and the supervision of the field experiences?
3. Reciprocity
   a. Should there be reciprocity among states for those individuals who have completed formal special education teacher preparation programs? If so, what should be the standards to which teacher preparation programs adhere?

b. Who sets these standards and what monitoring systems must be in place to ensure compliance?

4. Turf

a. Who will recommend the issuance of certification whether acquired through traditional or alternative avenues?

## Significance of the Issue of Certification

The state certification/licensure of teachers is commonly understood to be an accountability measure, rather than a means of quality control. At the same time, the certification practices of state governments (or other entities in a state) exert a strong influence over preservice teacher education. When certification requirements, regardless of their source, are seen as the entire set of qualifications and competencies necessary for personnel, the real significance of the issue becomes clear. College/universities may respond to the issue by adopting a relatively low denominator of state certification standards as the basis for training, or states may respond by issuing more and more elaborate and detailed certification requirements. The central problem appears to be the difficulty in separating the purpose served by state certification from the purpose served by training, and in separating minimum requirements from full qualifications.

The development that is expected to intervene to clarify this issue is the work of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (1991) which has been creating national standards for the teaching profession, including special education. In 1993, this

body will begin to offer advanced teacher certification, "which will complement, not replace, state systems of beginning teacher licensing" (p.8). These standards, which are developed through careful and substantive processes, should provide a new basis for differentiating between minimum compliance and full qualifications.

## Significance of the Issue of Alternative Certification

A large number of states currently sponsor alternative routes to certification, whereby certain potential personnel (who usually already have baccalaureate degrees in some fields) may acquire certification/licensure through a modified preparation program that often emphasizes practical experience and places the candidate in the classroom at a relatively early stage of training. Although alternative programs typically involve the state education agency, local districts, and higher education, the balance of power varies in these arrangements. In some cases, higher education plays a predominant role in program design and supervision of field experiences; in other cases, the role of higher education is diminished. The variation among programs makes it difficult to judge the phenomenon in a global way, or to reasonably advance a blanket rejection or acceptance of alternative arrangements.

Some alternative programs have been operating for years and can demonstrate effectiveness, but many are of recent origin. While a recent premise for such training emanated from shortages of personnel (notably for math and science instruction), it is also

true that these programs represent an attempt to place greater involvement in teacher preparation in the hands of state and district-level consumers. In states where the excessive length of special education preparation programs interferes with trainee recruitment, alternative programs may seem especially attractive.

In the quest to resolve personnel shortages in special education and to deal with the issues of who controls teacher preparation, there is, however, an "alternative to alternatives" that should be considered. This is the beginning teacher, induction, or mentoring model, in which the teacher's preparation is seen as continuing through the first one or two years as a full-time practitioner in the classroom. By viewing training as having a basis in preservice but completion in practice, it is possible to ensure basic preparation in higher education and final qualifications by means of induction preparation, which intertwines the efforts of school districts and higher education personnel. Such an approach (a) responds to the recommendation of various organizations (e.g., NEA) -- that personnel preparation should be much more school-based than has been the case in the past, (b) would enable some institutions to reduce the excessive time required to complete preservice training, (c) would offer mechanisms for cooperative school district/university training, and (d) might also increase the rate of entry into the field and decrease the rate of early attrition.

## The Issue of Reciprocity

That reciprocity of certification/licensure is one of the variables that influence personnel supply is illustrated in the work of the Northeast Common Market, which has created an interstate certificate as one means of expediting the deployment of personnel in this region of the United States [The Regional Laboratory of Education Improvement of the Northeast and Islands (1992, April)]. Whereas reciprocity has had some positive effect in these small, contiguous states, its impact elsewhere is less clear, because of the growing lack of mobility of teachers (Lauritzen, 1991; Nicholas, 1992). This lack of mobility is attributed to relatively low salary levels which tend to make teaching the source of a secondary, rather primary, income; thus, many teachers are not the primary wage earners in families, and their mobility is dictated by the location of the spouse (Lauritzen, 1991). The fact that the teaching profession is dominated by women underscores the assumption. Further, a large proportion of teacher education graduates tend to work within a fairly small radius of the location of their degree-granting institutions, and many are not inclined to leave urban/suburban areas, and so there is some doubt that greater reciprocity would solve recruitment problems in rural/remote school districts. The portability of pensions, seniority, and other benefits is also an important factor and may be of as much influence as certification reciprocity in propelling teachers to move.

While greater reciprocity of certification/licensure among states might expedite hires near state lines and under certain

other conditions, the propensity of teachers to transfer to other states is limited by these other factors that also need attention if personnel are to be more equitably deployed to the locations where they are needed. As is true of other decisions regarding personnel quality, supply, and demand, it is not useful to target a single variable in isolation.

## The Issue of Turf or Who Controls?

The world is at a crossroads of vast political, economic, social, and technological change and is moving from one era (industrial, modern) to another (post-industrial, post-modern). A new order may be expected to emerge across fields and pursuits. There is a sense that the old methods are no longer working well, but the new approaches are not yet clear. This ambience both intensifies turf issues and makes them more difficult to interpret.

As things change (and they always do!), concerns about power and control (and their loss) become intense; and so, at one level, turf issues are about the need to maintain the status quo and its power structures. At another level, the prospect of change itself brings about resistance, because of the difficulty, inconvenience, effort, and new attitudes required by change. Change is also threatening in terms of the roles and positions that people have filled or aspired to, and in terms of the disruptive qualities of change.

All of these things are as true of special education as of many other disciplines, but are perhaps exacerbated by (a) the widening gulf among the players (e.g., state departments of education, school

districts, institutions of higher education, various professional associations, teacher unions, parents, diverging agendas within the federal government), (b) the lack of clarity about the future, and (c) the polarization of the field.

## Consumer/Employer Issues

Can the public school readily find certificated teachers in all needed areas? The answer(s) to this question depend on several factors. Among them are:

1. the specific area of need (e.g., special education)
2. the geographic location of the school district
3. the ethnic/racial make-up of the school district and community
4. the pay scale, benefits, and incentives offered to the applicant
5. how easy/difficult/costly it is for applicants to become certified in the state
6. the skill level of the applicant matched with the need of the district

Therefore, the most frequent answer to the basic question is "Sometimes." The dilemma faced by the public schools is when a properly certificated and skilled applicant cannot be found. The reality of being in such a position is growing more and more common in the public schools.

Districts finding themselves in such a situation simply do the best they can, with the resources available. They hire teachers properly certified and skilled in other areas and work toward

alternative certification/endorsements; they hire more teaching assistants/paraprofessionals; they keep looking and hoping.

Districts are also creating programs to "grow their own" teachers. By working with colleges and universities, new partnerships are being developed. They are designed to assist teachers certified in other areas, and teaching assistants/ paraprofessionals who want to become teachers, to work towards proper certification in the "hard to recruit" areas. Such alternatives must be sought if public schools are going to continue to meet the growing needs of a more diverse student population. Traditional programs of the past don't need to be eliminated, but they do need to become more flexible and more creative to meet the needs of today and the future.

## Alternative Solutions

This article has already addressed many alternative solutions being utilized around the country today. The motivation for most strategies to "improve" teacher certification can be traced to political interests. We are indeed fortunate that we are all politicians. If we exercise our skills as educators, we may not always be found in a reactive position.

Space has not allowed for a discussion of site-based management and its relationship to special education and teacher certification. As states and localities continue to implement varied forms of site-based management, the issues arising must be dealt with--hopefully by professional educators working with out elected state and national leaders.

Since certification can be used as an instrument to bring about or suppress change, it is not surprising that it is a current focus of attention. More important, however, is the type of system that various approaches to certification can help bring about. State certification is one means that may be used toward a particular end. The larger issue, however, is the nature and place of special education in the 21st century. If we try to deal with certification apart from this larger issue, or try to use certification to force this issue, we will probably do little more than add further twists and turns on the road from here to there.

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